

A portrait of a young woman with dark hair, wearing a red dress with a white collar and a red flower in her hair. She is seated in an ornate chair, holding an open book with a miniature illustration of a scene with figures. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting her face and the book.

Remembering and Forgetting

Images of the Classical and Medieval Past in the Era of Revolution and Restoration

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There have been few eras in European history that have been more unsettling and disruptive than the period that began with the revolution in France. Never before had the breach with the past been as abrupt and decisive as in the ten years between 1789 and 1799. States and institutions that had seemed almost eternal before the storming of the Bastille, had vanished from the earth ten years later. The most Christian King of France had been beheaded, the venerable Republics of Venice and the Netherlands had disappeared, the Holy Roman Empire was in its death throes, and in 1799, with the death of Pope Pius VI in inglorious exile, it looked as if the papacy had joined the long list of extinct species of the past. To understand what was happening Europeans turned to their history to see if past experience could provide some clue to the confusion of the present, to see if there were similar situations in the past that could help them to make sense of the present, or if the present, despite its apparent novelty, was, in fact, the result of long developments that they had overlooked and that now had caught them by surprise.

In itself this reaction was nothing new. Europe had passed through similar crises before, though perhaps none as acute as this one, and in those crises, too, it had turned to the past to find guidelines for the present, to make the present less chaotic and threatening. But that past had always been the classical past. Whenever Europe felt the need for reflection on the past to make sense of the present it was ancient history it turned to, because that past seemed to answer all the

questions that people asked in the present. When Charlemagne tried to unite the many *gentes* (nations) he had conquered and make them into one Christian people (*populus christianus*), the emperors of Rome were his guiding stars; indeed, he himself became the first new Roman emperor of the West. The scientific revival of the twelfth century took the form of reflection on the works of Aristotle and other classical authorities. When Dante was contemplating solutions for the political chaos in Italy he called for a revival of the Roman Empire. On the ruins of Rome Petrarch dreamt of a rebirth of that extinct civilisation. In that famous letter he wrote while sitting in the Baths of Diocletian he exclaims: "Rome can be resurrected if its citizens will get to know themselves".¹ Macchiavelli read Livy when he wanted to teach the modern prince how to rule his state.

Even in the late eighteenth century the glory that once was Rome, was alive and well. For Edward Gibbon the Roman Empire of the second century, under the Antonine emperors, provided the foremost example of just and tolerant government and he described it as a shining example for enlightened princes of his own age. The Roman state, under Trajan, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, was a perfect balance between unity and diversity, between central authority and respect for local traditions. Its enlightened religious policy proved the point.² Every nation was allowed to keep its local gods, provided that they added the divine emperor to their own religious universe. Thus resent-

2.1 *Auguste de Châtillon*, Léopoldine au Livre d'Heures, portrait of the daughter of Victor Hugo, around 1835. [Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo, 768]

1 Petrarca, "Ad Familiares", VI.2.14, in: Petrarca, *Le famigliari*, II, 622-623.

2 Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, II, i (ed. Womersley, I, 56): "The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord".

ment and resistance to Roman rule vanished and turned into admiration and obedience: "The vanquished nations, blended into one great people, resigned the hope, nay even the wish, of resuming their independence, and scarcely considered their own existence as distinct from the existence of Rome".³ Gibbon's admiration for Rome was shared by the French revolutionaries, although for them it was not so much the empire - that reminded them too much of the *ancien régime* - as the heroes of the Roman republic that provided them with examples of civic virtue (e.g. the younger Cato who committed suicide rather than surrender to the dictator Caesar). Integrity, austerity, love of freedom and patriotism, those were some of the virtues of the ancient Romans and should be those of free French citizens. The rhetorical tradition of the Roman republic, as preserved in the works of Cicero, was a constant reminder of the days when great political issues were not dealt with in back rooms and secret negotiations, but before the forum of the nation, as now happened in the Assemblée nationale of the new French republic.⁴ Quite soon, however, the deliberations in the Assemblée turned into terror and led to the murder of the king. Dreams of freedom turned into fears of chaos. The revolution lost its appeal for many, even more so when the Republic became the Napoleonic Empire. And with that, the reflection on Roman history, which had seemed to justify not only revolutionary excesses but also the conquest of all of Europe by French troops, lost much of its appeal. The generation that saw the violence and bloodshed of the revolution and wanted to come to terms with a world that had gone haywire had to start looking for another past, a past that was not soaked in blood and tears, a past perhaps that so far had always been seen as the barbaric opposite of the civilised Roman past, the medieval past.

When Friedrich Schlegel delivered his famous lectures on the history of Europe in Vienna in 1810, he came to a conclusion that went directly against everything that Gibbon had maintained twenty years before. The Roman Empire, he argued, had always remained an amalgam of different nations which had never been properly integrated. It had never had a reliable constitution, its subjects had always remained dissatisfied and disloyal, but above all it had lacked one religious faith that could have bridged all the differences between the nations subjected to Rome and could have been the foundation of a higher unity. When that faith emerged, in the shape of Christianity, it was too late: the West never saw the integration of Church and Empire.⁵ It was not until the high Middle Ages that in Western Europe, the Church, and above all its head, the Pope, succeeded in creating a real unity of hearts and minds, because it then formed a spiritual power that was recognised by all princes as the voice of justice and true freedom. The Church brought unity among nations while recognising diversity between nations. No state would ever be able to do these things at the same time; that was only possible if all nations shared one faith under one spiritual leader, as they had in the Middle Ages.⁶

Where Gibbon had seen religion as a disruptive force and as a threat to individual liberty that had to be kept under tight state control, Schlegel argued the state was the main threat to man's freedom, and that only a religion embracing all states and nations could guarantee that basic human rights would be maintained. The explanation of this diametrically opposed point of view can only be that Gibbon spoke before the events in France and Schlegel after. For Schlegel it was more than obvious that the revolution had shown how despotic could become a state that no longer recognised a higher moral authority. From the perspective of the early

3 Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, II, ii (ed. Womersley, I, 70).

4 Schama, *Citizens*, 169-174.

5 Schlegel, "Über die neuere Geschichte", 168-170, 201.

6 *Ibid.*, 208.



1800s Gibbon's cheerful confidence in the Roman state must have seemed hopelessly naive: it was not religion that had destroyed Europe, but a state which in its drunken libertarianism had crossed all boundaries set by tradition, morality and decency. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that Schlegel and so many of his contemporaries turned away in disgust from the tyrannical Roman Empire and turned instead to medieval Christendom as the ideal of a free, peaceful and well-ordered society under the benevolent authority of the Supreme Pontiff.

Schlegel's friend and contemporary Adam Müller extended his admiration not only to the political but also to the social and legal structure of medieval society. Müller detested Roman law, judging it to be mechanical and an instrument of egoism.

He saw medieval society as a society built on reciprocity (*Gegenseitigkeit*), a society where people took responsibility for each other and where the common good prevailed over narrow self-interest. Feudal law was the clearest expression of that sense that no man could call anything his own, but that he had to use everything that was entrusted to his care, in the service of others. If there was such a thing as property in the Middle Ages, then it was always connected with responsibility. The tragedy of modern Europe was that in the commercial and industrial revolutions it had lost that sense of mutual responsibility and had returned to a notion of property without obligations, a concept that came straight from dead Roman law. Müller contrasts the modern industrialist, who treats his workers as replaceable slaves,

2.2 Caspar David Friedrich, *Abtei im Eichwald* (*Abbey in the Oakwood*), 1810.

[Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz]

with the medieval craftsman, who worked side by side with his men and shared their fate.⁷

By 1800 a whole generation, which had witnessed the consequences of revolution and terror, began to dream of a society that was based not on the egotistical - Roman - notions of individual rights and personal freedom, but on mutual trust and dependence, on service and faith, a just society, where responsibility had a face, where people would live once again in close-knit communities in which relations were based on trust, as had once been the case in the Middle Ages, when there had been that trust between the king and his vassals, the lord and his serfs, the craftsman and his workers, between the priest and his flock.

Medieval society began to function as a blueprint of a harmonious and peaceful world, that was now lost but had to be restored or, as Wordsworth put it: "I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration".⁸ But there was something more. And that comes to the surface when we look more closely into the way in which this generation of Romantics, if I may use that term loosely, contrasted the Middle Ages with Classical Antiquity. We saw that Friedrich Schlegel saw Rome as an exhausted, incoherent, tyrannical state, and that Müller called Roman law egotistical. But I can also quote others. Chateaubriand, in his *Génie du christianisme*, described Homer's heroes as cowards and misogynists, in comparison to the medieval *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*.⁹ August Schlegel, Friedrich's brother, thought that classical literature was flat, one-dimensional, without any depth and had nothing to offer to modern man. These four, and they are representative of a whole generation, all described classical culture in terms such as tired, old, degenerate, superficial. Their conclusion was that in classical literature they now could no longer find the words

that could make sense of the present, that could give a perspective to their experience of revolution and radical renewal. It was, to quote a biblical phrase, as if the salt of classical literature had lost its taste and was no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men (Mt. 5.13). They had to go out and look for fresh sources from which they could quench their thirst.

The Romantics turned everywhere: to India, the Middle East, Russia, but in the end they agreed that they could only find what they were looking for by returning to the origins of European culture. Not Greece and Rome, nor the Levant or India, but the Christian Church and Germanic culture were the two foundations on which modern Europe had been built. By returning to the days when those two had merged to form one new, vigorous and vibrant society, to the Middle Ages, modern man could refresh himself and find strength for the renewal of literature and culture that was so necessary now. For the Romantic generation medieval society and medieval culture could be a blueprint for our troubled times, because it was the undiluted source of the modern and showed the modern in its primal, pure essence. I want to say something more about that.

The discovery of the medieval as the pure beginning preceded the Revolution. It is connected with the first reaction against the dominance of reason in the middle of the eighteenth century, which we usually associate with the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but which had started considerably earlier in England. Simon Schama calls it the discovery of "the secular religion of sensibility".¹⁰ The late Roy Porter, in his book on the Enlightenment, says that somewhere around 1740 "the personal became the political".¹¹ No matter what one calls it, it is obvious that somewhere in the 1740s more and more people became aware that the cult of reason

7 Müller, *Die Elemente der Staatskunst*, I, 263-283, 312-313.

8 Quoted in Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 16.

9 de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme*, I, 274-279; II, 188.

10 Schama, *Citizens*, 29.

11 Porter, *Enlightenment*, 277.



did not set man really free, but reduced him to his intellectual abilities. The awareness grew that a person was much more than his reason, that he was possessed of a rich emotional life that made him unique and set him apart from all others. With sensibility came individualism, and both strengthened each other. “In this new world,” I quote Schama again, “heart was to be preferred to head; emotion to reason; nature to culture; spontaneity to calculation; simplicity to the ornate; innocence to experience; soul to intellect; the domestic to the fashionable; Shakespeare ... to Corneille” and, I would

add, “the medieval and the Gothic to the ancient and the Classic”.¹²

The choice medium for this rethinking of the self was, of course, the novel, a literary genre that came into its own in the course of the eighteenth century.¹³ But the other medium was what I would like to call ‘primitive poetry’. There was a growing conviction, fed by Rousseau’s writings, that, in the course of their development, language and literature had become too impoverished and too rational to express feeling, that in primitive society language and literature had been emotionally much richer and, therefore,

2.3 Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Dom über einer Stadt* (Cathedral towering over a town), after 1813 (copy of the lost original by K.E. Biermann, around 1830).

[Munich, Neue Pinakothek, 13422]

12 Schama, *Citizens*, 149.

13 Porter, *Enlightenment*, 283.



2.4 Caspar David Friedrich, *Der einsame Baum* (*The Solitary Tree*), 1822. [Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz; J.P. Anders]

more perfect. In primitive society literature had come straight from the heart and had been the expression of unspoilt passion. Rough and incomplete in form as primitive literature might seem when compared with later works, it was incomparably richer in its fullness of feeling. It was poetry and music in one. And so the first poets, the bards, were poets and singers in one, and what they sang came straight from the heart, inspired by the gods.

This new appreciation of primitive, popular poetry as a privileged expression of the emotional self had to, of necessity we can now say, lead to the discovery of the poetry of the Middle Ages, that era which so far had always been loathed and despised because of its barbaric and primitive character. But now that the barbaric had suddenly become beautiful all that might change. But that is hindsight. Europe's classical education was such that the revaluation of primitive literature started with the Classics themselves, with the discovery of the high qualities of Homer, the

first Greek poet. In 1735 the Scottish scholar, Thomas Blackwell, published his epoch-making *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*. In that book Blackwell argued that real poetry could only flourish in a society that was socially undifferentiated and in which man lived close to nature. Ancient Greece was such a society and that was the reason for the unique emotional vigour of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹⁴ How revolutionary that conclusion was, does not become fully obvious till the end of Blackwell's book when he compares Homer to Virgil. Until then Virgil had always been considered the most accomplished poet that had ever lived. Dante springs to mind as one of the many poets who thought that Virgil's work constituted the summit of lyrical effort. Blackwell begged to differ: "His [Virgil's] characters are all *formed* and *regulated*", unable to express the essential humanity of his personages. In Homer's epos Nature itself speaks to us directly, his work is "the great drama of life, acted in our view", full of unbridled passion and overflowing feeling.¹⁵ Blackwell's book was very influential and changed the canon of the Classics for good. But it did more than that. Blackwell himself suggested the possibility that in other societies, as archaic as ancient Greece, a poet of similar primitive vigour might be found. He even mentioned Celtic Ireland and Provencal troubadours. But his conclusion was: "[The troubadours] had neither Manners nor Language for Great Attempts".¹⁶ And he left it at that.

Something else was needed to convince civilised Europe that primitive, barbaric poetry was a much better vehicle for the expression of the passionate, emotional self than classical Greek and Latin poetry. That something else, came, of course, from Scotland, in the year 1760. The alleged discovery of the poetry of the ancient Scottish bard Ossian by James Macpherson

14 Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*, 26-27, 38, 41, 84.

15 *Ibid.*, 327-328, 334.

16 *Ibid.*, 112.

was the literary event of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ To a modern ear Ossian's poetry - or is it Macpherson's? - sounds false, but to contemporaries Ossian represented the passionate and emotional self in a way that no classical poet, not even Homer, could even begin to achieve. To give one example: "By the side of the rock on the hill beneath the aged trees, old Ossian sat on the moss; the last of the race of Fingal. Sightless are his aged eyes; his beard is waving in the wind. Dull through the leafless trees he heard the voice of the north. Sorrow revived in his soul: he began and lamented the dead".¹⁸

Like Homer, Ossian was represented as old, lonely and sightless, but very much unlike the Greek singer his soul was said to be filled with sorrow and his poems were lamentations for the dead heroes of yore. Melancholy, despair, and the weariness of life. That was what Ossian's poetry was all about. It tied in perfectly with the cult of sensibility or sentimentality, as it was expressed in the novels of those days, in which the generous man or woman of feeling would confront a heartless world and respond with what Roy Porter calls "oceans of tears, the troubled heart, and the panting breast".¹⁹ No surprise then that some of the greatest minds of eighteenth-century Europe, Hume, Diderot and Schiller among them, became speechless with admiration when reading Ossian's poems.

What made Ossian so popular was explained by the Scottish minister Hugh Blair, who in 1763 wrote an introduction to Ossian's poetry in which he tried to defend Macpherson against his detractors. In this essay he compared Ossian with Homer. The poetry of both men was typical of the primitive society that produced it - one hears Blackwell -: "both are distinguished by simplicity, sublimity, and fire". But the differences were much more important. Homer's poetry was what Blair called "cheerful and

sprightly", a witness to Greek vivacity, "a light and gay mythology", but often, when describing the quarrels among the gods, almost indecent. In Ossian's mythology there were only the pale ghosts of the dead, filled with tragic dignity, but far more universal in their appeal because they were part of what had been the popular belief of all ages and countries [2.5]; Ossian's poems represented the "mythology of human nature". His conclusion was that Homer was the poet of life and light, of action and battles, whereas Ossian was at his best when describing sentiment, and "tender melancholy". Homer describes the joy of living, Ossian the "joy of grief".²⁰

No one made this perceived difference between the two more clear than Goethe in his novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774). As long as the relation between Werther and his beloved Lotte is cheerful and unproblematic, the tie between them is confirmed by their reading Homer's joyful epos together. But as soon as the unconventionality and even the impossibility of their love dawns on them, as soon as tragedy overcomes them, Werther confesses to his beloved: "Ossian hat in meinem Herzen den Homer verdrängt" (Ossian has superseded Homer in my heart).²¹ For Goethe's Werther Ossian's poetry symbolises the dissatisfaction of a new generation with the naive belief in progress, the lack of feeling and sentiment, and the one-dimensional image of man that was so characteristic of the cult of reason. Twenty-five years later Madame de Staël was even more radical. In her mind classical poets, Homer included, were lively, charming and perfect in form, but as to the content of their work it was all 'plus de mouvements que de pensées' (more movement than thought). The poetry of Ossian and other bards of the North overflowed with deep feelings of melancholy and gloom, because it sprang from "sentiments douloureux de

17 Over the past ten years there has been quite a revival of post-modernist interest in Ossian's poetry. See e.g. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*; Gaskill, *Ossian Revisited*; Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques*; Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-century Britain*, 103-124; Groom, *The Forger's Shadow*; Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*.

18 Gaskill, *Ossian Revisited*, 18.

19 Porter, *Enlightenment*, 285.

20 Gaskill, *Ossian Revisited*, 390 (first quotation), 369 (second), 375 (third), 381 (fourth).

21 Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, 73, 110-111.

l'incomplet de sa destinée" (sad feelings of the incompleteness of destiny).²²

With Madame de Staël we have crossed the border from enlightened sentimentality to full-blown Romanticism, as the ominous words "incompleteness of destiny" indicate. What in the eighteenth century had been a soft melancholic mood, a cultivation of vaguely gloomy feelings, a wallowing in sentiment, now became radicalised. Man could never be at rest with himself, there was no harmony between man and the world, all men were strangers in a world in which they could never be at home. Man's desires were infinite, in a world that was finite. These are all formulations that indicate the deep unease that was generally felt around 1800 with the way the world was going. One of the most radical formulations of that profound unease can be found in the lectures that August Wilhelm Schlegel gave on the history of European literature in Berlin in the years 1802 and 1803 and in Vienna in 1808. These lectures resonated all over Europe and were considered one of the great manifestoes of the Romantic Movement.

What Schlegel wanted to do was to rethink completely the position of man and of his literature in the present crisis. Classical literature could not bring about such a change of heart. In ancient Greece and Rome man was too much at ease with himself. He was happy in the finite and had no desire for the higher, for the unknown; his religion was no more than the deification of forces of nature. Ancient poetry was a reflection of that happy short-sightedness, it was a "Poetik der Freude".²³ It represented superficial ideals and did not know about man's origin or final destination. Ancient poetry, in other words, was exhausted and had lost its creativity.

Rejuvenation came from two new forces that strengthened each other: the invasion of the Germanic tribes and the preaching of Christianity. The Germanic tribes, because

of their origin in the cold North, had always been more spiritual and less sensual than the Mediterranean peoples, and that spiritual outlook was reinforced when they became Christians. But there was a high price to pay. The Christian faith made people restless, dissatisfied with themselves; people became aware that here on earth they lived in a shadow land, that nothing on this earth is able to fulfill man's yearning. And that is, according to Schlegel the fundamental situation in which modern man, or 'romantic man', finds himself. Modern man knows that he is an exile, always in search of a homeland to which he has become a stranger. The Greeks could live in the here and now, whereas modern man is torn apart between memories of the past and fear of the future. The fate of modern man, Romantic man, is that he has to live with irreconcilable ideals, finite and infinite, that he has to try and realise all at once, although that is impossible.²⁴ That is also the reason why medieval literature, in Schlegel's eye the first non-classical and therefore modern literature, is far less perfect in form than classical poetry. The roughness of its form reflects the reconciliation of the irreconcilable. That is nowhere more so than in the *Minnesang*, troubadour poetry.²⁵ A renewal of literature now has to start with reflection on its medieval origin in chivalrous lyrical poetry.²⁶

Troubadour poetry was essential because for Schlegel the medieval knight was the prototype of modern man. The knight was, on the one hand, the heir to the ancient Germanic tradition of freedom and honour, of loyalty to the leader and heroic courage in war. On the other hand he was a Christian, whose deeds must be just, whose love pure, and whose sword must be used only to serve the weak and the poor. The medieval knight was torn between honour and faith, between the Germanic finite and the Christian infinite, as became nowhere clearer than in the

22 de Staël-Holstein, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, I, 181, 183.

23 Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 23.

24 Schlegel, *Geschichte der romanischen Literatur*, 83: "Die klassische Bildung ist durchgehends gleichartig und einfach: hingegen Heterogenität der Mischungen bezeichnet die Moderne ursprünglich, und so suchte sie auch in ihrem Fortschritte immer das Entgegengesetzte zu verbinden", and 99: "Zwist bestimmte den Charakter der modernen Bildung, in welchen die unauflösblichen Widersprüche unseres Daseins, des Endlichen und Unendlichen in uns, mehr hervortreten, aber wieder verschmolzen werden".

25 Schlegel, *Geschichte der romanischen Literatur*, 100.

26 Schlegel, *Geschichte der klassischen Literatur*, 24.

pursuit of courtly love and of the poetry that was generated by that impossible ideal. Courtly love, and its idealisation of women that could never be possessed, was a valiant effort to reconcile sensuality with spirituality, but it was doomed to failure. Chivalrous poetry was the first and most brilliant expression of the fact that in the post-classical, Christian-Germanic world, our world, the contradictions of human existence have become unsolvable. In the ideals of medieval chivalry modern man for the first time saw a reflection of himself, of his own fate and destiny: that was the message Schlegel had for his romantic contemporaries.²⁷

It was the same thought, though with a different touch, that was expressed by Victor Hugo in the preface to his Romantic play *Cromwell*, first performed in Paris in 1827. Hugo, too, was convinced that Christianity had changed man forever, inviting him on a quest for the spiritual and the infinite, and filling him with a thirst that could never be quenched. Classical literature was powerless to give voice to that yearning; it could only express the beautiful, the symmetrical, the perfect and was therefore monotonous and one-dimensional. With the coming of Christianity life had become infinitely more complicated, - and here he deviates from Schlegel -, more imperfect, more fragmentary.²⁸ It needed a new literature that could, at the same time, represent the beautiful and the ugly, good and evil, light and shadow, that could represent, and those are the key words, the sublime at the same time as the grotesque.

And that was what medieval literature had done: the demonic figured next to the divine, the comical next to the tragic, witches and demons next to angels and saints; it was a literature in which *la Belle* could fall in love with *la Bête*. Medieval literature was like the medieval cathedral, which in one building, in a complete unity of design,



could portray kings and saints together with ugly monsters and dwarfs.²⁹ The conclusion must be that for Schlegel, Hugo and the generation of Romantics the study of medieval poetry was not a hobby or a whim, but the beginning of a healing process through which modern man could once more find his place in a society that had gone topsy-turvy. Medieval popular poetry, by reconciling the irreconcilable, showed a way to overcome the profound disharmony that had befallen society since it had tried to cut its roots with the past.

The discovery of popular medieval poetry reflected another profound change in the historical consciousness of European culture, a change best described as the discovery of

2.5 Anne-Louis Girodet, *L'Apothéose des héros français, morts pour la patrie pendant la guerre de la liberté. Hommage offert à Napoléon Bonaparte (Tribute to Napoleon: Ossian Receiving the Ghosts of French Heroes)*, 1800. [Rueil, Musée National du Château de Malmaison; © RMN]

27 Schlegel, *Geschichte der romantischen Literatur*, 89-90, 94, 97-98.

28 Hugo, *Théâtre complet*, 413-414.

29 *Ibid.*, 416-417, 421-422.



2.6 Jean-Jacques Scherrer, *Entrée de Jeanne d'Arc à Orléans* (*Jeanne d'Arc Entering Orléans*), 1887.
[Orléans, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 791]

the nation. Classical literature and classical culture had always been the common possession of all civilised people in Europe: it was written in a language common to all, it united people from all over Europe, it represented the universal, and that had once been its attraction. But in the changing climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that universal appeal only seemed to add to

what was felt to be the superficiality of classical literature. If it was good for all, there was quite a chance that it was good for nobody. Everyone's friend is no one's friend.

The suspicion arose that literature could really evoke emotion and feeling only if it was a literature rooted in the people, sung by the people and written in the language of the people. The attraction of Ossian's poetry was, to a large extent, that he was the voice of the Scottish people and that his poetry had its roots in ancient Scottish culture. Universal culture was a superficial culture; for culture to be real, relevant and authentic, it had to be particular, rooted in one nation. Only in particularity could the universal become visible.

No philosopher has done more to spread that view than Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's fundamental thought was that world history was the sum of the histories of all its many nations (*Völker*) and their cultures, each of which had an innate, unique and individual spirit that developed over time. Every nation and every culture deserved respect and had to be judged on its own terms not ours. And although Herder assumed that the ultimate purpose of history was the realisation of a universal *Humanität*, it was not so that any one single nation represented that *Humanität*, no nation was universal or had a universal culture, every single nation contributed its own particular genius to the whole.³⁰ All culture was national culture, and no culture may presume to be universally valid.³¹ The worst sinners in that respect were probably the Romans. By trying to establish a universal empire the Romans had crushed countless nations and national cultures and had imposed the Latin language and Latin culture on them, instead of giving them space to develop their own culture.³² This meant for Herder that contemporary young people should no longer be taught

a dead language like Latin, but should be taught the language of their own people, so that from the earliest and most receptive age they could be in touch with the roots of their own culture.³³

If it was indeed true that all of history revolved around the nation, and if it was also true that the genius of the nation manifested itself most purely in its beginnings, then, in the case of Europe, the Middle Ages and not Antiquity constituted the crucial period of European history, for it was in the Middle Ages that all European nations had their roots. In the Middle Ages Europe's nations could find their genius in its purest form, and if they now wanted to renew themselves, become proud of themselves once more, they should imbibe their pure medieval past and try to bring it to new life.

In France it was Mme de Staël who became the apostle of Herder's revolutionary views on European history. In her famous report of her journey to the German lands she held up Germany as a mirror to France. She noted that French culture had become so superficial because, contrary to the Germans, the French had clung to an outdated classicism and had neglected their own medieval past. How could France have forgotten its own immortal heroes, such as Joan of Arc! Even worse, was it not Voltaire who had ridiculed Joan by turning her into a lecherous kitchen maid, whereas the simple truth was that the relief of Orléans in 1429 had been the apogee of French history [2.6]. And was it not events such as this that illustrated that the days of *le merveilleux chrétien* and *l'esprit de chevalerie* formed the heart of modern France, not classical history and classical literature.³⁴

To Germaine de Staël medieval French culture was the crucial period in French history, because "ayant ses racines dans notre propre sol, elle est la seule qui puisse croître et se vivifier de nouveau; elle exprime

notre religion; elle rappelle notre histoire: son origine est ancienne, mais non antique" (having its roots in our own soil, it is the only one that is able to grow and come to life again, it expresses our own religion, it reminds us of our own history: its origin is ancient, but not antiquated).³⁵ Thus she showed that the true identity of France was forever linked to the celebration of its medieval past.

In Germany Herder's call to the nation was heeded by a new generation of intellectuals who witnessed the humiliation of the German states by Napoleon. It is not too much to say that modern German nationalism was born on the battlefields of Jena and Auerstädt. In one respect this new generation went considerably further than Herder. For Herder the nation was a cultural entity, expressing itself mainly in a common language and common traditions of song and poetry. The Germans who witnessed the defeat of their nation by France drew one lesson from that experience: if the nation wanted to survive, it needed more than a common culture; it needed political unity. One of the first to draw that conclusion was the publicist Joseph Görres. In countless pamphlets he voiced his thoughts about a future German state, and again and again he pictured that future as being a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages Germany had been the first of all European states, and the Holy Roman Emperor had been the first of all princes, the Lord Protector of all Christendom. Within that empire all Germans were free through the privileges given by the Emperor to the estate to which they belonged, and yet they were one in their fidelity to the Emperor. The Imperial Diet, where the Emperor and his Estates met, was the expression of that unity in freedom. No other European state had known such harmony and peace.³⁶

30 Excellent descriptions of Herder's philosophy of history are to be found in Förster, "Johann Gottfried Herder: Weltgeschichte und Humanität", 363-387 and Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 186-213.

31 Herder formulated this thesis most polemically in his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, 505: "Jede menschliche Vollkommenheit [ist] national, säkular, und, am genauesten betrachtet, individuell", and 509: "Jede Nation hat ihren Mittelpunkt der Glückseligkeit in sich wie jeden Kugel ihren Schwerpunkt". (Italics J.G.H.)

32 Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 393-394.

33 Stolpe, *Die Auffassung des jungen Herder vom Mittelalter*, 161; Herder, *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian*, 183.

34 de Staël-Holstein, *De l'Allemagne*, II, 347-348.

35 *Ibid.*, 139.

36 The most programmatic pamphlet was Görres, "Der Kaiser und das Reich", 130-133, 175-179, 182-183, 186.

When in 1817 thousands of German students gathered on the Wartburg for a mass rally in which they called on their princes to unite Germany, they explicitly stated that they did so because they felt an unflagging desire for Empire and Emperor in their breast (“Die Sehnsucht nach Kaiser und Reich bleibt ungeschwächt in der Brust jeden deutschen Mannes und Jünglings”).³⁷ It would not be too much to say that the national future of Germany from 1806 to 1945 was usually debated in terms of its medieval past. It was only the massive defeat in the Second World War that released Germany from its unhealthy obsession with the Middle Ages.³⁸

No such obsessions plagued the English in their debate with the medieval past. Around 1800 in England it was clear for all that the medieval past was not only an inalienable part of the historical inheritance of all Englishmen, but also that England had never lost touch with that precious inheritance [2.7]. It was mainly Edmund Burke who showed the English a way to see their medieval past as a self-evident part of the present, by showing that in England there had always been and there always would be an unbroken continuity between the medieval past and the present.

Burke expressed his views on England's unique history most succinctly in his *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790). The purpose of that book was to show that a clean break with the past, as had happened in France, was the end of civilisation and freedom. True freedom was only possible if it was tempered by a sense of obligation to the past; in Burke's words, “always acting as if in the presence of canonised forefathers; the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity”.³⁹ Therefore, England's past must be part of its present: “From Magna Charta to the Declaration of Rights, it has been the

uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity”.⁴⁰

The present generation must respect all of its history, the living must respect the authority of the dead and shape their future in dialogue with their past.

Burke's influence on England's way of dealing with its past has been decisive. Burke himself was only talking about the English constitution as a living organism, but in the course of the nineteenth century his model of continuity and change was transferred from strictly constitutional history to the history of England as a nation.⁴¹ In its finished form this Whig interpretation of history ran somewhat like this: contrary to the unfortunate nations on the other side of the Channel it was England's great and unique privilege to have, since the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons at least, a history of unbroken continuity, where change only affirmed that continuity and strengthened it. It was a history of growing freedom, prosperity and success.

It began in ancient times with the *Witenagemot* that Anglo-Saxon kings gathered around them to discuss matters of state. Its medieval stage was marked by Magna Charta and the beginning of Parliament. And it had reached its triumphant final stage when in 1688 the English people proudly subjected their new king to a declaration of rights which for once and for all established the freedom of all citizens.⁴² There was nothing in that past that an Englishman needed to be ashamed of; every period had made its own invaluable contribution to the nation's glorious progress in time. In Freeman's words, ‘our ancient history is the possession of the liberal’.⁴³ In the course of the nineteenth century it became a vision shared by all Englishmen of every political conviction.⁴⁴

37 Keil, *Die burschenschaftlichen Wartburgfeste von 1817 und 1867*, 55.

38 Althoff, Fried and Geary, *Medieval concepts of the past*, 2.

39 Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 121.

40 *Ibid.*, 119.

41 Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, 106.

42 For some English attitudes to the medieval past around 1800, see Smith, *The Gothic Bequest*, 132-146.

43 Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, 3.

44 *Ibid.*, 2, 241.

In conclusion, I have tried to show that in the eventful years around 1800 the classical past forever lost its firm grip and monopoly on Europe's memory. To make sense of the revolutionary changes of those years Europeans turned to another past, a past that had always been considered shameful and barbaric, the medieval past. They discovered that the Middle Ages presented a political and social alternative to the chaos and disruption of the present. Once a society had existed in which everyone had known his place, in which the Church had been the guardian of peace and concord, in which authority and community had been the prop of true freedom. A return to the sturdy virtues of that society would put Europe on its true foundations once again and would be the beginning of a return to freedom and peace.

It was also a past in which people had been more innocent and more naive; above all it was purer, with more heart than head, more nature than culture. People had not been torn apart as they were now but they had lived a simple life in close touch with their emotions and feeling. Medieval poetry might have lacked the consummate taste of Horace or Virgil, but in its robust and primitive verses it showed a trueness to life unequalled by the classics.

And finally, in an age that discovered the nation as the organising principle of history, it became clear that the Middle Ages had been the cradle of those nations. It was in those days that the foundations had been laid on which, since then, a mighty building had been erected that now drew near to its completion. And so, by 1800 the people who had not so long ago been despised as the barbaric destroyers of all that was civilised, now were seen as the founding fathers of modern Europe, as an example of heroic virtue and as an inspiration for the political and cultural renewal of Europe.



The generation of 1800 thought about the Middle Ages, wrote about the Middle Ages and dreamed about the Middle Ages. But to all intents and purposes it remained a literary journey. It was a later generation that went even further and tried to give shape to their dreams, to recreate the Middle Ages, to rebuild what had been lost, in churches and town halls, in palaces and stations, in decorations and in manuscripts. But that is a story others are about to tell.

2.7 Benjamin West, *Presentation of the Crown to William I, 1792-1797*.
[Liverpool, National Museums, Walker Art Gallery, 6946]